

Life coaching for doctors



Medical doctors work very hard, often under difficult circumstances. They are somewhat like race cars, in that both are expected to have high performance as well as reliability. One important difference, though, is that race cars have a team that makes sure they are superbly maintained. Doctors, on the other hand, often have little support, do not do enough for self-maintenance, may be taking in the wrong fuels, and expect to keep going even when they're just about out of gas. Doctors, who care so well for others, are notorious for being deficient in self-care.

What is it about doctors?

Doctors are driven and perfectionistic. Their sense of worth may be closely tied to productivity and success, often while simultaneously feeling inadequate or even impostor-like. Doctors have trouble relaxing and devoting time to non-work pursuits. Because they believe that they're able to cope with most anything, doctors are hesitant to delegate and to receive support, and they insist on looking fine to others no matter what.

Burnout in doctors

Burnout is not a medical diagnosis, but it is a widely recognized syndrome with 3 main features:

- 1) Chronic exhaustion which is not alleviated by rest. It can be any combination of mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion.
- 2) Detachment from others and/or from one's own experience; feeling not present or in a fog.
- 3) Decreased sense of effectiveness - having less ability to do what one has always done, whether at work or at home.

There is an epidemic of burnout in medicine. In 2012, 46% of over 7,288 US physicians surveyed from a variety of specialties reported at least one symptom of burnout.¹ The 2017 Canadian Medical Association National Physician Health Survey² of over 3,000 Canadian physicians found that 38% of residents and 29% of physicians reported some degree of burnout, while 49% of residents and 33% of physicians screened positive for depression. The Medscape National Physician Burnout, Depression & Suicide Report 2019³ surveyed over 15,000 physicians in 29 specialties. The highest reported burnout rates were among urologists (54%) and neurologists (53%), while ophthalmologists at 34% were among the specialties with the lowest rates of burnout. In the same survey, ophthalmologists were the 3rd happiest at work (39%) behind only plastic surgery (41%) and public health (40%). In a Canadian study, 35% of Quebec ophthalmologists reported "high levels of burnout and psychological distress," with

younger physicians most affected.⁴ While ophthalmologists are relatively spared with respect to physician burnout, the burnout rate is still much too high.

A newly developing emphasis on physician self-care

In 1948, the World Medical Association adopted the Declaration of Geneva Physician's Oath as the "modern Hippocratic oath." There have been a number of revised editions since then. In the 2017 revised declaration⁵, for the very first time, there is included a promise of physician self-care: "I will attend to my own health, well-being, and abilities in order to provide care of the highest standard." Additionally, the 2017 CMA policy paper on Physician Health⁶ recommends that physicians and learners "demonstrate a commitment to physician health and well-being as part of their responsibilities."

Life coaching

The International Coaching Federation defines life coaching as: "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential."⁷ Coaching has been proposed as "a way to help physicians maximally access personal strengths and skills to handle work-related stressors, thereby reducing vulnerability to burnout and helping those who are burned out recover."⁸

Coaching typically involves active listening by the coach, thought-provoking questions used to raise client awareness, cognitive tools for challenging and/or reframing the client's thinking, encouragement, celebration of successes, and helping to hold the client accountable to their commitments.⁹ Much like a personal trainer who helps an individual exercise harder and more effectively than they would on their own, coaches help accelerate clients' accomplishment of their goals.

Coaches listen actively in a supportive, non-judgmental way. Unlike mentors, they don't act as experts and aren't directive. Instead, they are facilitators who use thought-provoking questions to help clients tune into their self-knowledge. The idea is to empower the client to trust their inner wisdom. While physicians are strongly scientific and rational, it can be valuable for them to learn to better value their inner, or intuitive, voice. This is one important way that coaching can increase the client's sense of control over their life.

With the help of their coach, clients can increase self-awareness. They can focus on how they want to live, and what kind of person they want to be in their various professional and personal roles. Life coaching does this by focusing on core values, maximizing the use of one's best strengths (signature strengths), and clarifying what provides meaning and vitality. Understanding and honouring our values is vital for living a meaningful life. When we make choices that fit with our values, we tend to feel happier and more

Table 1—What can coaching help with?

1) Creating new career or life goals	8) Tools to decrease stress
2) Developing a personal wellness plan	9) Seeking and accepting support
3) Reducing burnout	10) Learning to have more fun
4) Improved work-life balance	11) Transforming negative thought, emotion, and behaviour patterns
5) Resilience and coping skills	12) Leadership skills
6) Moving from being self-critical to being self-supportive	13) Improved interpersonal and assertiveness skills
7) Creating a new narrative for one's life	14) Mindfulness skills

fulfilled. Signature strengths are the strengths that work best for an individual and matter most to them. The intentional use of our signature strengths is associated with increased happiness levels and flourishing in life. Five of these strengths have been most closely linked to life satisfaction: hope, vitality, gratitude, curiosity, and love.¹⁰

Coaching is not based in a medical model. Most stressed doctors do not suffer from formal psychiatric diagnoses and do not need psychological treatment. In a medical culture that stigmatizes physician mental illness, there are fewer stigma attached to coaching as opposed to psychotherapy. Coaches see their clients as unbroken, creative and whole. They believe in the client's ability to change and grow. Unlike psychotherapy, coaching does not focus on fixing what's wrong with the client. Coaches instead emphasize appreciative inquiry. This is an approach that focuses on what is already working well, why it is working, and how to build upon it. Coaching is solution-focused and results-oriented.

Although the most common reason doctors seek life coaching relates to questions about their career,¹¹ there are a number of other possible motivations for coaching. There may be a sense that something is not right in one's life. Things might look good from the outside but not feel satisfying. You may be just going through the motions with little enjoyment or may be drifting along without a sense of direction or purpose. You may wish to thrive instead of just getting through each day. Some of the potential benefits of coaching are listed in Table 1.

What is the evidence for physician life coaching?

Research on the effects of life coaching remains in its early stages but is promising. A 2013 meta-analysis¹² on the effects of coaching in non-medical organizations found that coaching has positive effects on performance, wellbeing, coping, work attitudes, resilience, mindfulness, and goal-directed self-regulation.

To date, research on physician coaching is quite limited. A 2019 Mayo Clinic study⁸ looked at 88 physicians in the departments of medicine, family medicine, and pediatrics. After receiving 6 telephone coaching sessions every 2-3 weeks, burnout decreased by 17.1% vs an increase of 4.9% in the control group. A small study of 11 physicians at Duke

University¹³ found that coaching helped physicians increase resilience, primarily via increased self-awareness, improved prioritization and boundary setting, and increased self-care and self-compassion. It was also noted that these improvements led to perceived indirect improvements in patient care. In a 2019 study¹⁴ at Georgetown University School of Medicine, 37 first year medical students received two group and two private coaching sessions. Results showed a significant improvement in stress management.

Conclusion

In the face of the staggering rates of burnout in medical doctors, the time is now for both medical culture and individual physicians to pay great attention to physician well-being. Systemic changes are needed, but until the workplace environment improves, doctors need to focus on helping themselves as individuals.

Life coaching is becoming increasingly accepted and recommended in the world of medicine. Coaching can help doctors who are burning out, doctors who are facing life challenges and decisions, and doctors whose lives are going well but who feel like they have untapped potential. If you are interested in receiving life coaching, I strongly encourage you to seek a coach who has attended an accredited training program and has been certified by the International Coaching Federation. To find a life coach who has experience working with doctors, you might consider contacting your provincial physician health program.

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Footnotes and Disclosures

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